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## SOLIDARITY AND BUREAUCRACY

AFTER the Great Miners' Strike ended in March 1985, the Tories were quick to claim that the miners had failed because other workers had refused to support them. Strangely enough, the trade union leaders' explanation of the strike's defeat was exactly the same: their rank-and-file members, they said, had been unwilling to take the solidarity action demanded by the miners.

This was the line taken, for example, by Ron Todd, general secretary-elect of the biggest and traditionally most left-wing union, the Transport and General Workers. He told a solidarity rally towards the end of the strike:

Don't pretend that we have got an army out there straining at the leash — because we haven't . . . Some of them [rank-and-file trade unionists] put the Tories into power . . . You can't make a backbone out of wishbone.<sup>1</sup>

The reality is somewhat different. Rank-and-file trade unionists displayed considerable solidarity with the miners, sometimes in the form of industrial action, more often in the form of donations of food and money. However, their leaders refused to build on this support, and left the miners to fight on alone.

### **Rank-and-file solidarity**

Throughout the strike there were acts of solidarity which shone through the platitudes, rhetoric and conscience money that were the currency of the trade union leaders.



Pride of place must go to the railway workers of Coalville in Leicestershire. From 3 April 1984 until the end of the strike, they sealed off the working Leicestershire coalfield. The only time the British Rail management got trains out of the Leicestershire pits was when they imported scabs from out of the area to drive the trains and operate signal boxes. Throughout the strike, there were more railway workers backing the NUM in the Leicestershire coalfield than there were miners. They suffered enormous harassment for sticking to trade union principles.

Roy Butlin, secretary of the Coalville NUR branch, told the Mineworkers Defence Committee solidarity conference in December 1984:

My members at Coalville have not moved any coal by rail in the Leicestershire coalfield for 35 weeks. There were times in the long summer months when we seemed to be the only trade unionists doing anything. We're in the middle of a working coalfield, but we've been holding back half the production from Leicestershire. Virtually every pub and club [in Coalville] has barred us. Of the 19 Labour councillors, 13 are scabs and two are the wives of scabs.

In September 1984, British Rail threatened to close down the Coalville rail depot within a few weeks if the blacking wasn't lifted. On the same evening they issued the ultimatum, British Transport police burst into the homes of seven active supporters of the blacking campaign, looking for 'railway property'. Three men were sacked as a result for 'stealing' a few bars of soap or having a few British Rail cloths.

'The British Rail Board state there's no connection between the arrests and the fact we're not moving coal, even though the police raids were on the same evening as the closure threat!' said Roy Butlin. The Coalville NUR men demanded national action from their union against these victimisations: 'We pleaded with the NUR headquarters in London for some national action in support of the miners and the reply has been: "don't escalate it".'

Unsupported, the Coalville railway men held firm.

Then just before Christmas 1984, British Rail declared one railway worker 'mentally unstable' and removed him from duty. 'It was the dirtiest possible trick,' said Roy Butlin, 'but it gave them a clear line between Bagworth pit and Drakelow power station. We've been patient, waiting for our leaders to do something, but all we've



had is assurances that they'd talk to British Rail. I think they are scared of sequestration if it goes further . . . But we want industrial action.'

The signalman was eventually transferred to another box. British Rail was claiming he was 'mentally unstable' and unfit for work, yet they moved him from a goods-only line to a passenger line, just to get him out of the way of the coal trains.

The Coalville men wanted a 24-hour rail strike to warn British Rail against further victimisations and intimidation of those blacking coal. The ASLEF and the NUR executives were forced by rank-and-file pressure to call some action — but limited it to railway workers in the Midland and Eastern regions. 'They are asking the depots that have suffered the most to take a day's strike,' said Roy Butlin. 'The leadership couldn't get away with doing nothing, so they have done the minimum . . .'

It was a spineless response to union members who had given everything to maintain their solidarity with the miners, and other railway workers recognised it by taking unofficial action in support of Coalville.



Police arrest a miner lobbying parliament, June 1984



Of course the Coalville men weren't the only railworkers to deliver real solidarity for the miners. Hardly any coal moved by railway during the strike. Train drivers and guards from the Shirebrook depot, which served eleven North Nottinghamshire pits, and signalmen at Worksop reduced the flow of coal to the Trent Valley power stations from 400,000 tons per week to around 60,000 tons. A Shirebrook NUR official described the pressure they were under to lift the blacking:

There were threats of sacking, a massive propaganda campaign and British Transport police at the depot — sometimes up to thirty officers in full riot gear. There were even police horses sometimes. The signalmen at Worksop who were blacking coal were visited by management daily and threatened with the sack. They were also taken to the power stations to see the lorry convoys taking in coal and were told that all the jobs would be lost.

Another example of action by railworkers was when ASLEF drivers and NUR guards halted Charing Cross station in London on 7 June after police had stopped an NUM lobby from reaching parliament. The railworkers were angered when police beat up an ASLEF official, John Davies.

All honour to the Coalville railworkers who refused to move coal, but the leadership of the NUR and ASLEF failed to use the resilience of these workers to help the miners effectively. Instead they instructed their members to let head office know when they were sent home from the job for refusing to move coal, so that the union could pay their wages — and ASLEF spent some £250,000 on this, when they should have called all railworkers out in protest. Early in April some railworkers in the North West refused to move coal and were sent home, and the rank and file spontaneously walked out, threatening to bring out signalmen at Warrington, which would have stopped all rail traffic to the North West, including Liverpool and Manchester. The support was there if the rail union leaders had been willing to lead.

The determination of the railworkers who stuck by the miners throughout the strike was remarkable. But the most spectacular acts of solidarity took place in Fleet Street at **The Sun**, which was twice closed when printers blacked the most hysterical and blatant lies it told about the miners.

When editor Kelvin McKenzie proposed to produce a particularly obnoxious front page on 16 May, showing a picture of Scargill



with his arm raised under the headline 'Mine Führer', all the chapels (with the significant exception of the journalists) refused to handle the page. The production unions then closed **The Sun** completely for three days after McKenzie refused to print a half-page statement of support to coincide with the South East Regional TUC's Day of Action on 27 June.

At the end of September the paper was closed again after the printers had objected to a headline and editorial calling miners the 'scum of the earth'. An NGA official at the paper explained:

We were prepared to print it, in its entirety, provided the print unions could add a disclaimer. The management refused, so we asked for equal space for the NUM to reply, or even a paid advert on page two. All they told us was to write a letter, which they would consider for publication — but there was no guarantee.

So the printworkers closed the paper.

The strikes at **The Sun** and blacking by railworkers were the most significant solidarity actions, but far from the only ones. A sizeable minority of trade unionists showed their support for the miners by taking part in regional days of action in solidarity with the NUM in the late spring and summer of 1984.

Many other trade unionists did not feel strong enough to take industrial action, even for a day. But there were other ways in which they could help the miners, above all by collecting food and money for the mining communities. The second month of the strike began to see a growth in miners' support groups, which sprang up in the major urban centres, and spread rapidly throughout the country in the summer.

Much of the impetus behind the miners' support groups came from Labour Party activists. Many constituency Labour Party members were disgusted by Neil Kinnock's fence-sitting. They swung whole-heartedly behind the miners. Their activities were given some legitimacy by a decision at the end of April by the Labour Party's national executive to impose a weekly levy of 50p a head on Labour Party members for the NUM. Typically, the executive did nothing to implement this resolution, leaving it to local activists to give meaning to their words.

Some indication of the scale of the solidarity activity three months into the strike is given by the June issue of the left-wing magazine **London Labour Briefing**. This reported work going on in South London, Greenwich, Redbridge, Newham, Lewisham, Cam-



den, Tower Hamlets, Ealing, Haringey, Hackney, Islington, Croydon and Brent. A national supplement carried reports about the activities of miners' support groups in Birmingham, Exeter, North Staffs, Manchester, Southampton, Cardiff, Brighton, Swansea, Caerphilly and Preston.

The scale of activity was considerable. Tony Benn told a meeting at the Labour Party conference on 29 September that £150,000 had been spent in Chesterfield supporting the miners. 'We have replaced the DHSS,' he said. Chesterfield was, of course, in the heart of the North Derbyshire coalfield, but there were remarkable achievements far from the pits. Dennis Skinner told the same meeting that Tooting Labour Party in South London had raised £20,000. 'That's a challenge,' he said: 'be Tooting!'

The work of the local Labour Parties and the miners' support groups was geographically based. There was, however, an active minority of trade unionists who sought to collect for the miners at work. The Socialist Workers Party organised workplace collections from the very start of the strike. But the work was done by many far beyond the ranks of the organised left.

One of the most imaginative efforts was made, once again, in the heart of Fleet Street's lie machine. In August the NGA and SOGAT printworkers' chapels at the **News of the World** and **The Sun** produced a 'Right to Reply Special'. The sixteen-page paper sought both to reflect the experience of miners and their families, and to explain why printworkers supported their cause. 10,000 were sold, at 50p each, and another 2,000 were given to the NUM free.

The chapels also adopted a pit, Birch Coppice in Staffordshire, and collected £500 a week for the mining community there. John Breen, deputy father of the **News of the World** composers' chapel, told **Socialist Worker**: 'To be quite honest, I know there are people here who won't send money to the NUM to be used for [pickets'] petrol, but they will give money to miners' wives and kids. That's something they feel they can identify with.'<sup>2</sup>

Twinning — the direct linking of a particular trade union branch or workplace with a pit — began to be widely adopted in the summer and autumn of 1984. Groups of trade unionists began to start regularly visiting the pit villages, creating a network of rank-and-file links between the miners and the rest of the working-class movement.

One early example was again in Fleet Street. Workers at Reuters press agency, who were collecting about £50 a week as well as food and clothing, started to visit Blidworth colliery in Nottinghamshire. As



Doug Shaw of Reuters explained:

Meeting other workers who are giving them support provides a tremendous morale booster for the strikers. Added to that, the visits have stepped up the political level of the people who make the journey. Every time we go we try to take at least two what we call 'neutrals' — people who aren't necessarily socialists and who might have some doubts about the strike. It's these people who are really changed by the experience. When we first went up there they were just stunned by the numbers of police in the village.<sup>3</sup>

These links help to explain why Fleet Street trade unionists collected an estimated £2 million for the miners.

Even in the steel industry, there was considerable support for the NUM. Tommy Cassidy was branch secretary of the Templeborough No. 1 ISTC branch in Rotherham until his union credentials were removed. He told *Socialist Worker* on 1 December 1984: 'I've been charged with "discrediting the union". My only crime is supporting the miners and behaving like a proper trade unionist.'



Workers from Kellogg's in Manchester deliver food and money to a miners' kitchen in Pontefract



Tommy Cassidy had raised £14,000 for the miners from his members by the time he was barred from office. He told local miners that some steelworks were only working a three-day week to prevent electricity cuts — important news for miners who were being told day after day that their strike wasn't biting. And he spoke out for the miners at the ISTC conference. Tommy explained why he'd been able to raise so much money from steelworkers despite the attempts by management, the press, the union officials and Labour leaders to set miner against steelworker.

No steelworker anywhere wants the miners to lose. We all know there's thousands more jobs to go in the industry and if the miners win we've a better chance of success. Of course, we should really be fighting alongside the miners, not hoping that they would go away.

The solidarity movement grew to astonishing proportions. Doreen Massey and Hilary Wainwright tried to summarise its scale early in 1985:

The support from the cities has been massive. On Merseyside there are fourteen support groups, which between them have sent off £1 million (a *million* pounds — from a city itself in desperate poverty), and that's not including workplace collections, and new groups are still being formed. There are normally fifty to sixty miners out in the city centre. From Birmingham support goes to South Wales, and also to other more local coalfields. From London it has gone to Kent, South Wales, Staffordshire and the North East; individual boroughs and support groups have twinning arrangements with pits in many different coalfields. There are people with buckets, collections of food, on high streets everywhere, an anarchy of support groups and what appear to be a number of different attempts to form umbrella organisations.<sup>4</sup>

Support extended far beyond the big cities, natural opponents of Toryism, to 'Thatcherland' — the relatively affluent south and east. The miners' support groups in Cambridge and Milton Keynes, for example, collected respectively around £600 and £800 a week.

Thus, as the strike wore on, a great movement of solidarity gathered round the miners. When it was all over, **The Guardian** estimated that perhaps as much as £60 million was collected. This figure alone gives the lie to the claim that the miners had no support



among other workers. A large minority of trade unionists not only sympathised with the miners' cause, but were willing to take some sort of action in their support.

The only question was whether the union leaders were prepared to give some positive direction to this movement.

### **Official inaction**

The trade union leaders publicly reacted to the miners' strike depending on where they fell in the left-right divide within the TUC. The right-wing unions generally spurned the NUM's appeals for help. Bill Sirs, as we have seen, cheerfully encouraged his members to handle scab coal.

The predominantly right-wing power workers' leaders were equally hostile. For example, on 14 April John Lyons, general secretary of the power engineers union (EMA), turned down a request from NUM general secretary Peter Heathfield that the power unions black the movement of coal.

These reactions were predictable enough. The left-led unions were, in formal terms, much more positive. The three rail unions (NUR, ASLEF and TSSA) voted on 29 March along with the Transport and General Workers Union and the seafarers' union (NUS) to block completely the movement of coal. A co-ordinating committee was set up at the TGWU headquarters, Transport House.

The rail unions and the NUS made the most serious efforts to implement this decision. The NUR executive instructed its members to black all coal on 2 April. The seafarers' union issued similar orders the next day. Its members halted coal from being shipped from the Durham and Northumberland pits to the south-eastern power stations until near the end of the strike. The railworkers' efforts had a serious impact. The *Financial Times* reported on 27 February 1985, very late in the strike:

At present BR is handling about a third of the 600,000 to 700,000 tonnes of coal available per week to be moved. Only 40 coal trains are moving a day out of a possible 300, with 40 to 200 staff suspended daily for refusing to move coal.

The biggest of the left unions, the TGWU, was much less successful. One of the union's most important groups was the lorry drivers, who had in 1979 punched an enormous hole in the Labour government's 'Social Contract'. But TGWU general secretary Moss



Evans admitted afterwards that the miners' strike exposed union organisation in the road haulage industry as 'abysmal'. TGWU members were heavily involved in moving scab coal and iron ore to the steel plants. At the beginning of July, George Wright, the union's South Wales regional secretary, revealed that two-thirds of the scab lorry drivers servicing Llanwern were TGWU members.

Solidarity action by the official trade union machine was at best limited, even on the left. What none of the union leaders were prepared to do was link the miners' strike to issues affecting their own members' direct interests.

Yet early 1984 had seen a stirring among trade unionists far beyond the pits. There were signs of a new mood of militancy among a minority of workers, shown by the considerable support for the national day of action in protest against the ban on unions at GCHQ in Cheltenham. Over a million trade unionists struck, many of them in the engineering and car industries which had been so severely battered by mass redundancies in the previous five years.

There was more to this new mood than anger at Thatcher's arrogance. The British economy experienced in 1983-4 a limited recovery from the depths of the recession. In some industries, workers found that they had greater bargaining power: management, with larger order books, were forced to make concessions in order to keep production going.

BL's Austin Rover car plants at Longbridge and Cowley had experienced one of the toughest management offensives of the 1970s and early 1980s. The improved financial position of Austin Rover now helped to provoke a counter-offensive by the shop floor in early 1984. Cowley experienced a rash of 'downers' — short, sharp, unofficial strikes. In early May Longbridge workers won what one shop steward called 'the first clean factory-wide victory we've had for a long time' when they forced management to abandon plans to reduce manning levels. A month later the plant was closed down again in protest against the sacking of a black driver for punching a racist foreman. Although this strike was defeated, Austin Rover workers were clearly no longer cowed into submission.

There were other disputes of this nature, reflecting workers' greater confidence. British Aerospace's plant at Filton, near Bristol, was paralysed in the summer and early autumn by a ten-week dispute during which two groups of workers occupied parts of the factory. Teachers displayed the first serious wage militancy for ten years or



more. Spurred by the effects of the public spending cuts, and an insulting 3 per cent wage offer, they massively supported the programme of selective action decided upon by the NUT conference in April.

The strike figures reflected this new mood. There were 26,564,000 strike-days in 1984, the third highest figure in British history. The miners' strike accounted for the bulk of the working days 'lost' — a mammoth 22,265,000. But the remaining 4,299,000 strike-days are still an increase of more than 26 per cent compared with 1983. Even more impressive is the rise in the number of workers involved in work stoppages outside mining — 1,137,000 in 1984, more than twice the 1983 total of 451,400. The number of strike-days in the crucial metals, engineering and vehicles sector shot up from 1,420,000 in 1983 to 2,024,000, the highest figure in five years.

The situation therefore presented the government with serious dangers once it became clear that the miners' strike was unlikely to collapse quickly. By late April the strike had spilled into the middle of the public sector pay round. Although the Tories had been careful to avoid imposing uniform wage norms in the public sector of the sort which brought Heath and Callaghan down, they ran the risk of provoking a major group of workers to join the miners on strike.

This was especially true of industries where Thatcher had in any case planned to attack. The miners were simply the most important group to be the objects of a concerted government offensive. Crucially, the railworkers were another. In 1981–2, the train drivers had bitterly resisted British Rail's attempts to impose flexible rostering on them. When the rail unions submitted their pay claim in January 1984 BR chairman Bob Reid told them that any wage increase was conditional on their acceptance of major productivity increases — in particular the introduction of one-man trains.

With the miners on strike the situation was transformed. The two manual rail unions, the NUR and ASLEF, were led by left-wing officials. The railways saw the most sustained and significant solidarity action with the miners. Now the rail union leaders, Jimmy Knapp of the NUR and Ray Buckton of ASLEF, reacted to the Rail Board's hard line by calling a ban on overtime and rest-day working from 30 May. Arthur Scargill appealed to the rail unions to come out on strike and open a second front against the Tories.

He had reckoned without the political skill of the government, and the timidity of the left trade union leaders. Thatcher was pursuing a coherent class strategy. Her aim was to beat the miners, and in doing



so force the entire trade union movement onto the defensive. Like any good general, she knew that it was essential to concentrate all her forces on one main target, and to avoid fighting on more than one front at the same time.

So the Tories did all they could to isolate the miners. This implied two things in particular. First, the government avoided using the Employment Acts against the NUM in the early months of the strike, resisting pressure from the Tory right wing, and, after Orgreave, from SDP leader David Owen. The reason was simple, as the **Sunday Times** explained: 'A legal action could have caused the escalation the [Coal] Board have so far managed to avoid — and drag in support from mining areas and trade unions which have not given it up to now.'<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, the Tories showed themselves willing to make concessions to other groups of workers in order to keep the miners isolated. Whatever they conceded could, after all, be clawed back in the climate of demoralisation likely to follow a defeat for the NUM. This strategy was essentially a continuation of the 'salami tactics' Thatcher had used against workers since 1979, avoiding, as the Ridley report had advised, confrontations except in circumstances where they could be sure of winning.

The clearest case was that of the rail unions. Government documents leaked to Paul Foot and published in the **Daily Mirror** on 6 June 1984 revealed that pay negotiations between British Rail and the unions were orchestrated from Downing Street. British Rail chairman Bob Reid was first instructed to spin the talks out as long as possible. When the unions retaliated with their threat of an overtime ban, **Daily Mirror** industrial editor Geoffrey Goodman described what happened:

By early May the Rail Board was prepared to face industrial action . . . Bob Reid warned the unions that he was determined to have greater efficiency and cut costs. He was convinced, at the time, he had government backing.

*Suddenly the scene changed.*

A week before the scheduled industrial disruption, the rail union leaders were called in and offered an improved pay deal — 5.2 per cent on basic rates, which, overall, is worth about 7 per cent — and a completely softened line on the productivity clauses of the deal.

Privately the rail union chiefs confessed that they were 'amazed' at the Rail Board turn-round.



The explanation for the turn-around was to be found in a passage in one of the leaked documents. John Selwyn Gummer, Tory Party chairman and junior Employment Minister, had written to Transport Secretary Nicholas Ridley on 17 April: 'It seems to me to be critical at this juncture to avoid the risk of militants being strengthened in their attempts to block the movement of coal by rail, and to make wider common cause with the miners.'

There was nothing strange about the Tory retreat. What *was* amazing was that the railway workers' leaders should have accepted the improved terms offered them on 23 May. The issue of productivity had only been deferred. Knapp and Buckton threw away an opportunity to take on British Rail at a time when, in conjunction with the miners, they could have forced the Tories onto the defensive.

The **Financial Times** commented on the rail settlement:

Most importantly for ministers . . . it increases the isolation of groups such as the miners and the teachers who are taking industrial action.<sup>7</sup>

This sorry story was repeated a number of times — the Union of Communications Workers settled in June for 4.9 per cent, the water workers for 4.6 per cent. Generally the government was prepared to lift its wage offers slightly, by half or one per cent, in order to prevent industrial action spreading beyond the coalfields. The trade union leaders were only too ready to accept these miserable offers, and desert the miners, without whom they would not have gained them.

Even Liverpool City Council, led by hard-line Labour left-wingers (including supporters of the **Militant** tendency) fell in with the gadarene rush. The council had refused to implement Tory cuts in local government spending, to set a local budget. Faced with the prospect of imposing government commissioners on Liverpool at the same time as they were mounting an enormous police operation in the coalfields, the Tories retreated.

Environment Secretary Patrick Jenkin cobbled up a deal with Liverpool Council. A combination of creative accounting, a little extra government money, and the council's abandonment of its policy of increasing neither rates nor rents, got the government off the hook.

But, again, confrontation had been only deferred. Jenkin's rate-capping Bill, then on its way through parliament, was the next line of further government attack on Labour councils. Liverpool faced the choice between defying the law or implementing Tory cuts again, in March 1985 a few weeks after the miners' strike ended — so leaving



them in a much weaker position than in 1984. Another opportunity had been squandered.

### **First tragedy, then farce: the dock strikes**

Margaret Thatcher was nevertheless pursuing a high-risk strategy. The Tories' various efforts to break miners' picket lines involved the co-operation of other workers — to unload coal and iron ore from freighters, and to transport it to steelworks.

The government was blessed by possessing in the steel industry a particularly craven bunch of trade union leaders and a deeply demoralised workforce. They couldn't always count on such luck. Solidarity action by railworkers forced them to move most coal by road, using scab lorry drivers. There was always the danger that the Tory blacklegging operation might goad a powerful group of workers into action.

This possibility became a reality in July, when scabbing at Immingham provoked a national dock strike. The dockers were in any case in the government's firing line. 1972 had, after all, not only been the miners' year. It had seen the humiliating defeat of the Heath government's attempt to jail five dockers' leaders for defying the Industrial Relations Act.

At the root of both the 1972 and 1984 disputes lay the National Dock Labour Scheme. Introduced in 1947, it had finally put an end to the evil of casual labour in the docks. A register of dock labourers was drawn up; they alone could work in the docks, and were guaranteed fall-back pay when they weren't working. Dock Labour Boards on which unions and managements were equally represented administered the scheme, and agreed on a pre-entry closed shop — only union members could be employed.

On the basis of the scheme the dockers were able to build powerful shop stewards' organisations, and win significant improvements in their wages and conditions. But in the 1960s the spread of containerisation meant that goods could be moved directly from ship to land transport, shifting a large portion of what previously had been dockers' work to inland depots and stores where workers did not possess the strong organisation built by the dockers. Non-registered ports such as Dover and Felixstowe mushroomed.

Registered dockers found their position seriously under threat. Their number shrank from 65,000 to 43,000 between 1967 and 1972. By 1972 more than 14 per cent of the survivors were without work, on



the low-paid Temporary Unattached Register.

An unofficial rank-and-file body, the National Port Shop Stewards Committee, took up the challenge. Selected inland container depots were picketed, in defiance of the Industrial Relations Act. After a series of preliminary skirmishes, five militant stewards were imprisoned in July 1972. Rolling unofficial action, spreading from the docks to Fleet Street, transport and engineering, forced the TUC to call a one-day general strike. Suddenly a hitherto unknown figure, the Official Solicitor, appeared and secured the release of the five dockers from Pentonville prison.

The Industrial Relations Act was never the same again. However, the dockers were unable to extend the Scheme to the unregistered ports. A three-week national dock strike called in the summer of 1972 to achieve this goal ended inconclusively after TGWU general secretary Jack Jones cobbled up a deal with Lord Aldington, chairman of the National Association of Port Employers. Its most significant provision was improved terms for dockers accepting voluntary redundancy. By 1984 there were only 13,500 registered dockers left.

The Tories were plainly gunning for the National Dock Labour Scheme. It was precisely the sort of scheme, created by strong workers' organisation, which Thatcher was pledged to destroy. They were also under pressure from port employers to dismantle the Scheme. The *Financial Times* reported on 10 July 1984:

The issue flared up at the employers' annual luncheon in April. Union leaders were furious at speeches made against the scheme in their presence, though Mr Nicholas Ridley, the Transport Secretary . . . said only that the government was keeping a close eye on the scheme which, he hinted, represented the sort of restrictive practice which was hampering the ports industry. With the mineworkers' strikes just beginning at the time, the government was clearly anxious not to open a second front.

Ridley did say that the ports 'were no longer seen as part of the country's infrastructure, requiring central planning and control. Instead, like any other industry, they should and could compete among themselves.' The message was plain enough.

The Transport and General Workers Union responded to Ridley's speech by threatening an immediate national dock strike if there was any threat to the scheme. It was difficult to know how seriously to take this warning. Two years previously they had put an ultimatum to the government, demanding that the latter extend the



scheme to all ports, or face an all-out strike. But the TGWU had conveniently forgotten this challenge a few weeks later, using the Falklands war as a pretext.

Meanwhile scab coal was pouring into the country through non-registered ports such as Wivenhoe in Essex. This not only threatened the miners' strike. It was a dry-run for the sort of black-legging operation which would be needed to smash the Dock Labour Scheme.

The leaders of the TGWU — general secretary Moss Evans, his successor Ron Todd, and national docks officer John Connolly — found themselves in an increasingly difficult position. The TGWU was the biggest union in the country. Since the late 1950s it had been anchor of the broad left in the TUC. Evans' predecessor, Jack Jones, had symbolised the immense power wielded by the trade union bureaucracy in the mid-1970s.

The transport union leaders were worried by the threat to the Dock Labour Scheme. They genuinely wanted to help the miners. They were confronted with the spectacle of their members driving scab coal through miners' picket lines. Yet they were not prepared, until their backs were up against the wall, to take concerted national action against the blacklegging.

The most striking illustration of the TGWU's failure to act was that of iron ore, blacked by the rail, seafarers' and transport unions in June 1984 in an effort to counter the steel unions' scabbing. The iron ore continued to enter Britain through three ports — Port Talbot, Hunterston and Immingham. All three were covered by the Dock Labour Scheme, and employed registered dockers, members of the TGWU. At Port Talbot, for example, these dockers did the trimming and bulldozing on board the iron ore ships essential to removing the ore from the ships' holds.

This was not only a betrayal of the NUM. It also threatened the dockers themselves. This was most clearly illustrated by what happened after Mick McGahey attempted to halt the supply of coal to Ravenscraig in May. The registered dockers at Hunterston agreed to black coal — and British Steel retaliated by using ISTC members and non-union labour to shift the coal. The TGWU threatened a Scottish dock strike.

The crisis was resolved by an agreement on 17 May. Management promised that no one would do the dockers' work. In exchange the TGWU agreed that the ships could continue to be unloaded — without the dockers. They were put on 'alternative work'. The dockers



had more or less negotiated themselves out of a job, creating a disastrous precedent.

A similar issue provoked the first dock strike of summer 1984. Train drivers at Immingham refused on 3 July to transport iron ore bound for Scunthorpe steelworks across a miners' picket line. BSC management tried to transfer the ore to lorries. Immingham's registered dockers refused to scab on the train drivers, and walked out. The TGWU leadership, unhappy about the local agreement made at Hunterston, called a national dock strike on 9 July.

Suddenly things didn't look so good for the Tories. They were already under economic pressure. The financial markets were jittery. Share prices experienced in early June their biggest fall since the last miners' strike had brought down the Heath government in March 1974. Various factors were involved — the strike had cut industrial output; high American interest rates were sucking capital from all over the world into the US; the oil price was falling, and so therefore were the North Sea revenues underpinning sterling.

But trouble on the industrial front tipped the balance. On 11 July the Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson, was forced to raise interest rates by 2 per cent to steady the pound on the foreign exchanges.

International capital was beginning to worry about Thatcher. Even before the dock strike, *The Economist*, usually one of Thatcher's staunchest supporters, had launched a fierce attack:

Mrs Thatcher's second government is stepping out to become Britain's most inept since the war . . . Mrs Thatcher seems to have lost her ability to move . . . without slipping on a banana skin and falling on her face. She looks alarmingly like Mr Harold Wilson in the closing days of his 1966 administration.<sup>8</sup>

Then came the dock strike. Suddenly Thatcher looked like Wilson or Heath, adrift in a sterling crisis and facing widespread industrial militancy. Whitehall dusted off the emergency regulations which the last Tory government had been forced to use five times in the early 1970s. Things like this weren't supposed to happen under the Iron Lady.

The miners' situation was transformed. They had been beaten at Orgreave. But if other trade unionists joined them they could still win. The *Financial Times* reported on 16 July that the oil companies' 'big fear' was that the dock strike would 'escalate', 'bringing the whole of the TGWU into the fight'. That would stop all movement of oil,



with catastrophic consequences for the power stations, thanks to the CEGB's policy of replacing coal with oil to beat the strike.

The dock strike put the skids under the talks between the NUM and the Coal Board. Previously it had been MacGregor who had been holding out for victory, now it was Scargill. 'On 9 July the miners' strike looked closer to settlement than at any time since it started', **The Economist** lamented.<sup>9</sup> Then came the dock strike.

The NUM held a special conference on 12 and 13 July. It had probably been called to approve a deal. Instead, it hardened the miners' terms, demanding no pit closures except on grounds of exhaustion, a four-day week, and a £30-a-week pay rise. On 18 July, talks between the miners' union and the NCB ended in stalemate.

The government were in a vulnerable position. The TGWU had called out all its members in the docks — not just 13,500 registered dockers, but also the 19,000 dockers employed in ports outside the Dock Labour Scheme. **The Economist** reported:

The Confederation of British Industry was playing the effects of the dock strike pretty cool . . . Two facts make that coolness suspect. First, the newer ports on the east coast, which may defy the strike call, handle only about 30 per cent of Britain's non-fuel exports and imports. Second, if the seamen's union successfully blocks container lorries from using Channel ferries at Dover, that would hit six out of every ten tonnes of freight going to the EEC ports which account for a third of Britain's non-oil exports.

The Institute of Directors says it has been showered with telexes from members saying they could not survive a prolonged shutdown.<sup>10</sup>

The strike was initially solid. All 71 registered ports were shut, and the critical roll on/roll off traffic through unregistered ports such as Dover and Felixstowe was halted. The unregistered dockers were the key to winning the strike. Without them the registered dockers could be isolated and beaten.

The trouble was that the unregistered dockers were on strike to defend a scheme of which they were not part. The only way to ensure their solid support was to make the central demand of the strike the extension of the Dock Labour Scheme to all ports.

Dover dockers had spent thirteen weeks out on strike in 1973 demanding that the scheme be applied to them. The strike had been beaten because of the TGWU's refusal to call a national dock strike in



### Dover's support.

Legislation passed in 1977 gave the Transport Secretary the power to extend the scheme by statutory order. To use the strike to force Ridley to use this power would have made the issue one of defending the jobs of *all* dockers, not just those in registered ports.

If ever there was a time to launch an offensive strike, to defend the scheme by extending it, it was in July 1984, when the government were already confronted with a miners' strike.

But having called the strike, the transport union leaders did nothing to win it. TGWU deputy general secretary Alec Kitson dropped broad hints that the dock strike was just a shot across the port employers' bows, not a serious battle. Local officials were equally short-sighted. Jimmy Symes, a TGWU full-timer in Liverpool, said: 'It is a great pity this strike has come along now to interrupt our pay negotiations.'

The officials' hand was strengthened by the decline of rank-and-file organisation in the docks since the early 1970s. After the 1983 strike at Tilbury two dockers, Bob Light and Eddie Prevost, had explained:

Since 1978 the National Port Shop Stewards Committee has achieved virtually nothing . . . The shop stewards' movement has been so depressed that if you're an individual militant shop steward in the docks, without a deep political commitment, you accommodate . . . And the only realistic way you can see of carrying on is to use the official machine.<sup>11</sup>

In 1972 the dock shop stewards had operated independently of, and often against the full-time officials. Now, however, they had become dependent on the TGWU machine. This had serious consequences for the 1984 strike.

Hardly any picketing was organised. This was a particularly gross error in the case of the non-scheme ports. Ports such as Wivenhoe had been deeply involved in the import of scab coal. There was no guarantee that they could be relied on to support the dock strike. Moreover, mass dockers' pickets would have put severe pressure on the state's resources. Policing the miners' strike was strain enough; coping with both miners and dockers might have been too much.

These failures on the part of the dockers' leaders, either to organise mass pickets or to demand the extension of the scheme, doomed the strike. The unregistered ports were clearly the weak link, and it was at Dover that the strike cracked on 19 July. Lorry owner-



drivers who were being stopped from using cross-Channel ferries by the strike stormed onto the docks and threatened to burn the port down. The local TGWU officials gave in to this blackmail — while the police, of course, did nothing to prevent this blatant intimidation.

Had the dockers' leaders been willing to involve nearby Kent miners in their picket lines, they could have seen off the lorry drivers. As it was, the strike collapsed. The TGWU national docks officer, John Connolly, rapidly accepted from the port employers a meaningless form of words which he had rejected before the Dover debacle. What had begun as a show of strength ended in a pathetic shambles.

The issue of British Steel's use of registered ports to scab on the miners would not, however, go away. In early August the TGWU leadership persuaded dockers at Hunterston to black the **Ostia**, a ship carrying 95,000 tonnes of coking coal bound for Ravenscraig. But although national union officials such as Ron Todd were vehemently critical of the local agreement earlier struck at Hunterston, their aim was not to halt the flow of coal and iron ore to Ravenscraig completely.

Instead the TGWU leadership offered BSC a quota of 12,500 tonnes of coal a week. In the negotiations which followed, the transport union leaders upped their offer to 18,000 tonnes a week, the amount originally agreed by the Triple Alliance on 11 May. British Steel felt confident enough to reject this quota, proposing instead 22,500 tonnes.

Then after prolonged negotiations involving the West of Scotland and National Dock Labour Boards while the **Ostia** waited offshore, BSC got the go-ahead from Whitehall to berth and unload the ship without an agreement. The TGWU was forced to react. On 31 August the docks delegate conference of the union's Docks and Inland Waterways Group voted by 78 to 12 to call the second national dock strike in six weeks.

Support for the strike was much less solid from the start. A number of ports were now decidedly shaky — dockers at Immingham, for example, who had started the first strike, initially refused to come out. The main non-scheme ports, Dover and Felixstowe, carried on working. Following the pattern in the Notts NUM, scab organisers appeared in the docks mounting back-to-work movements at Tilbury and Hull.

The weakness of the strike was a consequence of the way in which it was led. The TGWU insisted on restricting the issues of the strike to British Steel's breach of established trade union practices in using non-dock labour to unload the **Ostia**. They played down the connection between this dispute and the miners' strike. This was a



feeble ploy: every docker knew that BSC used scab labour because the TGWU were blacking coal bound for Ravenscraig.

Again the transport union officials refused to make the extension of the National Dock Labour Scheme the central demand of the strike. They relied instead on appeals to the dockers' loyalty to their union. The dockers' commitment to trade unionism is legendary, but loyalty to workers' organisations is never unconditional. It is sustained only by the organisation's ability to deliver concrete improvements in workers' lives.

Even worse, transport union officials were prepared to make local agreements with the port employers which further undermined dockers' unity. During the strike **Socialist Worker** published details of an amendment to the agreement covering dockers at Felixstowe, the largest non-registered port.<sup>12</sup> This gave the dockers there injury and severance terms similar to those enjoyed by their counterparts in the registered ports. The agreement was signed in August 1984, mid-way between the two dock strikes. The Felixstowe employers' aim was obvious — by concessions to the largest group of workers outside the scheme they hoped to deprive Felixstowe dockers of any incentive to join in a future strike. The scandal was that the TGWU was prepared to fall in with this obvious piece of divide-and-rule.

The very unevenness of the strike made it impossible for militant dockers simply to rely on calls from the full-time officials. Serious mass picketing was mounted. It involved usually only a minority of strikers — 150 at Tilbury, for example, in the first week of the strike. Nonetheless the back-to-work movements were a flop, and dockers at some ports, for example Fleetwood, reversed decisions not to strike.

The activity of a militant minority could not, however, substitute for the lack of any coherent leadership by the TGWU. Without any clear focus, the strike drifted inevitably into haggling between the union leaders and BSC over how much coal should be allowed into Ravenscraig.

The outcome was a victory for British Steel. The final agreement was that Ravenscraig should receive, as its managers had demanded, 22,500 tonnes of coal a week. The steel bosses reserved the right to use non-union labour at Hunterston in certain circumstances.

The dock strike ended on 18 September. As if to hammer home the point, the port employers immediately launched an offensive at Tilbury and Bristol. Tally clerks at Tilbury walked out when confronted with a new set of working practices, including changes in manning levels, operating agreements, and wages. The struggle over



the Dock Labour Scheme had only been deferred. Another set of union leaders had backed down at the very point where they had stood the best chance of winning.

## Enter the TUC

Despite the debacles in the docks, the summer saw considerable pressure for the labour movement to take action in support of the miners. Orgreave was probably decisive in crystallising this mood. It burned into many minds the image of a state on the rampage, determined to crush the NUM at any price. One photograph, from the second battle of Orgreave, of a mounted policeman charging a woman from the Sheffield Policewatch group, summed it up: the miners weren't just fighting for themselves, they needed everyone's support.

The defeat suffered by the miners at Orgreave thus had a contradictory effect. It pushed the strike onto the defensive, but led many inside and outside the mining communities to think about it in much more general political terms, as a broad class issue.

On 30 June **The Economist** reported an opinion poll which showed that 35 per cent of the British public supported the miners.

But this substantial minority was passive; they did not have the confidence and strength to deliver solidarity action on their own. Ten years of mass redundancies and declining workplace organisation had taken their toll, as in the docks. The support offered — collections of food and money rather than industrial action — reflected this.

But this lack of confidence did not mean those who supported the miners would refuse to take action if they were offered a lead. The general passivity meant that even activists looked towards the official leadership of the labour movement to deliver action. The weakness of workplace organisation generally forced militants to rely much more on the left wing of the trade union bureaucracy and on the Labour Party leadership, than in the early 1970s.

So there were high expectations of the 1984 TUC Congress, to some degree orchestrated by the NUM leadership. Scargill in particular seems, after Orgreave, to have focussed more and more attention on the trade union leaders. This was probably for two reasons. First, the power unions could deliver a decisive blow to the Tories' hopes of getting through the winter without electricity cuts. Secondly, involving the TUC in the strike would mean that, if the miners were defeated, responsibility would be seen to fall on the shoulders of the trade union leaders.



So where did the TUC stand?

This question was posed ever more sharply when on 30 July the first serious legal blow was struck against the miners' union. The South Wales Area was fined £50,000 for refusing to obey an injunction to stop picketing two small road haulage firms involved in the scabbing operation at Port Talbot and Llanwern. When the union refused to pay up, its assets were sequestered two days later.

If one union could be treated like this, they were all under future threat. The TGWU were in an especially embarrassing position, since some of the lorry drivers working for the scab firms were members of the union.

What would the union leaders do?

There was some talk of organising 'massive disruption' — by which was probably meant a national day of action, similar to that of 28 February 1984 in protest against the trade union ban at GCHQ. But the crucial question was: would the transport union leaders now instruct their members not to cross picket lines — and thus avoid situations such as that which led to the South Wales sequestration?

In an interview on BBC radio on 5 August, Ron Todd said: 'What is required from people is not instructions — you cannot have coercion as a substitute for commitment — but a positive, supportive leadership from the whole trade union movement.'

This amounted to an abdication of leadership. The buck was passed to the rank and file, giving the confused, the vacillating, and the straightforwardly hostile a perfect excuse for backsliding. Instructions on their own wouldn't have guaranteed action. But an active campaign by the left-wing trade union leaders to persuade their members of the need for action would have provided a focus for the minority of militants who wanted to help the miners but felt unable to take the initiative themselves.

Despite the left union leaders' hesitations, the TUC met in Brighton on 3 September amid an atmosphere of excitement and anticipation. The previous year's Congress had been dominated by the centre-right of the General Council and their 'new realism' — proposals for close collaboration with government and employers. Scargill had been denounced for his intransigence by Alistair Graham, general secretary of the main civil service union, the CPSA.

This year Scargill was cheered to the echo when he addressed the Congress, and Graham was forced off the General Council as a result of the Broad Left's capture of the CPSA executive. A General Council statement supporting the miners was overwhelmingly passed. The



trade union right was openly split, with David Basnett of GMBATU and Gavin Laird of the AUEW clashing with Eric Hammond and John Lyons, leaders respectively of the electricians' and power engineers' unions and the only noteworthy opponents of the statement.

This realignment of forces, bringing the TUC centre-right and the left together and isolating the far right, was not simply a consequence of the miners' strike. The 'new realism' had been scuppered by the NGA dispute at Warrington and the ban on unions at GCHQ in Cheltenham earlier in the year. It had assumed that if the trade union leaders abandoned defiance of the government and turned to co-operation then Thatcher would reciprocate. Her contemptuous dismissal of the TUC delegation who went to 10 Downing Street to plead the cause of the GCHQ unions made it clear that she would not.

Trade union leaders such as Len Murray, David Basnett, and Moss Evans did not want confrontation with the government. Their role was essentially that of negotiators, seekers of compromise. They looked back wistfully to the trade union bureaucracy's heyday in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, when they had enjoyed ready access to 10 Downing Street.

But the willingness of the ruling class to admit the TUC to the corridors of power then was a reflection of the strength of organised labour. This power had, of course, been at its height in the early 1970s when trade union resistance brought down the Heath government. But workers' strength had been eroded in the decade after Heath's fall.

Thatcher felt she no longer needed the TUC's active co-operation. Not that she aimed to destroy organised labour. There was still a place for the trade union bureaucracy in the Tory dispensation, though a much reduced one, politically subordinated to capital, and denied much of the elaborate structures of consultation with government and big business typical of the post-war era.

The Trade Union Act of 1984 was part of this strategy. It required the use of secret ballots for strikes, union elections, the political levy for the Labour Party, and closed shops. Failure to comply with the provisions of the Act would make the unions liable to court action. The aim was to make the structure of industrial relations much more formal, increasing the power of the union bureaucracy over its members and thus preventing unofficial strikes. At the same time, the new law sought to push the union leaders rightwards, and to undermine their links with the Labour Party.

This was a recipe for the Americanisation of the trade unions.



Hardly any of even the right-wing union leaders were prepared to embrace such a prospect with any enthusiasm. The main exception was the electricians' union, which concluded no-strike agreements with several multinational firms. But such business unionism was unpalatable to TUC heavyweights who had once enjoyed access to Whitehall.

The miners' strike posed these union leaders with a dilemma. They had no time for what David Basnett was later to denounce as 'Scargillism' — meeting Thatcher's class-war Toryism with labour's own class-war methods. On the other hand, a defeat for the miners would gravely weaken the trade union movement, and further undermine its leaders' bargaining power. 'We don't want Arthur to win, but we can't let the miners lose,' one TUC leader told the press.

So the General Council came off the fence. In May Len Murray had denounced regional TUCs who held days of action in support of the miners — for example, in Yorkshire and Humberside and in Wales. Now he told the TUC:

We now stand shoulder to shoulder with them [the miners]. Our purpose is to bring the concentrated power of this movement to bear on the NCB and the government, to get the Board back to the negotiating table and in a frame of mind to make an agreement. This is the paramount objective. The whole of Congress must be aware of the serious consequences for all if the movement fails to give the NUM the proper support it needs and if the NUM is defeated in this dispute.

David Basnett of the GMBATU delivered the same message. He was the key figure in the re-alignment of the General Council. Moreover, as the leader of the main manual union in the power industry, he would have a decisive say in any decision concerning solidarity action with the miners.

At the NUM's request Basnett took part in the negotiations between the miners' leaders and representatives of the TUC General Council the week before the Congress. The result was a statement from the General Council which asked two chief things of affiliated unions — first 'not moving coal or coke, or oil substitutes for coal or coke, across NUM official picket lines, or using such materials taken across such picket lines'; second, 'not moving oil which is substituted for coal'.

There was a price to be paid by the NUM in exchange. Up to this point the miners' leaders had firmly kept the TUC at arm's length,



refusing to involve them in negotiations. Now they had to let the General Council into the direction of the strike. The statement approved by Congress included the following clause: 'The NUM acknowledge that the practical implementation of these points will need detailed discussion with the General Council and agreement with unions who would be directly involved.'

The TUC leaders spelt out the implications. They had not been won to 'Scargillism' — they applauded Neil Kinnock's 'fraternal address' in which he once again denounced the pickets. Their aim was to get the strike settled as quickly as possible. Len Murray — before the miners' strike ended he was Lord Murray — said:

To date, at the wish of the NUM, the General Council have not been involved although many unions have. Now we are involved to the hilt . . . The purpose of the procedures set out in the statement is to devise arrangements to make the dispute more effective and to make mass picketing unnecessary.

David Basnett was even more explicit. Speaking after talks between the miners' leaders and the Coal Board had been announced, he said:

We are involved. We have applied pressure on the NCB and the government and we have succeeded. That was the purpose of the TUC statement. It wasn't and couldn't be a blueprint for spreading strike action in the coal-using industry — even if that was desirable and deliverable.

The TUC leaders were horrified when the talks seemed to fall through later in the week because of MacGregor's obduracy. Their pacific intentions were made clear in other debates. The General Council were able to beat off left-wing attempts to withdraw permanently from the National Economic Development Council, a forum involving government, unions and employers. They were prepared to put pressure on the Tories, but only with the aim of winning re-admission to the corridors of power. 'I am a negotiator, let me negotiate,' Basnett successfully pleaded.

The pattern was the same throughout the week. The centre-right retained control of the General Council. Although the NGA won a vote of censure on the General Council for their handling of the Warrington dispute, the more important portion of their resolution — automatic support for any union in conflict with the Tory laws — was defeated.



Thus although the TUC had formally pledged itself to achieving a miners' victory, it was plain that the General Council had no serious intention of implementing this policy. No wonder that **The Economist** concluded after the TUC that the miners' defeat was inevitable:

Mr Scargill's defeat will come from within the union movement . . . On Monday, the Trades Union Congress took the first shambling step, six months too late, towards this defeat when its moderate executive gathered the miners into the bear-hug of 'total support' — support which it has neither the capacity nor the intention to deliver . . . The TUC may be an ironic weapon for Mrs Thatcher to wave in the face of union militants. But at present it is the best she has.<sup>13</sup>

### **The miners and the Labour left**

The 1984 labour Party conference later that month was also very different from its predecessor of a year before. This had met in the wake of Labour's disastrous defeat in the June 1983 general election. The objective of the new leadership under Neil Kinnock was to avoid defeat next time.

Kinnock's strategy was straightforward. The Labour share of the vote had declined catastrophically from its all-time high of 51 per cent to a mere 27.6 per cent in 1983, barely two points ahead of the SDP/Liberal Alliance. This reflected a massive exodus of working-class voters — only 39 per cent of all trade unionists voted Labour in 1983. Since the electorate had moved to the right, so too must the Labour Party.

From Kinnock's point of view the miners' strike was a disaster. It set up a road block across Labour's path rightwards and allowed the Tories to attach to Kinnock precisely the sort of class-struggle politics which he was trying to drop. At the same time, a mere refusal to back the miners would bring down on Kinnock the wrath of the Labour left. So he sought to balance between the two sides in the dispute, calling for a ballot and supporting the strike; even-handedly denouncing both police and pickets; pressing the NUM into negotiations and attacking Thatcher for her intransigence.

At the same time, the miners' strike revitalised the demoralised Labour left. Labour Party activists did much of the work of the miners' support groups. Many who had begun to think that the Greenham peace women were a more plausible force for change than



the industrial working class now found themselves enthusiastically working around a major strike. Confidence which had drained away in June 1983, leaving the pessimistic belief that 'Thatcherism' was unstoppable, was restored. Many heard the miners chant 'We will win' and believed it.

This new mood inevitably reflected itself within the Labour Party. The strike dominated the conference.

'The miners have totally transformed the atmosphere of the conference,' said Tony Benn at the fringe meeting held by the Campaign Group of Labour MPs on 29 September. Dennis Skinner said at the same meeting: 'Confidence is oozing out of the Labour Party everywhere up and down the country . . . We've got them on the run, and it's a nice feeling.' He also attacked Kinnock, to massive applause:



Arthur Scargill and Neil Kinnock meet at Durham in July



'Stop talking about violence unless you want to talk about police violence. Get on the picket line and see it for yourself.' The meeting showed where it stood by donating £1,000 to the NUM, and giving Peter Heathfield a standing ovation.

The mood was much the same when the conference itself discussed the strike, on 1 October. Scargill was greeted with adulation and the NUM's resolution calling for support overwhelmingly passed. Kinnock had to sit by while speaker after speaker condemned police violence and refused to criticise the miners. He had to listen while Tony Benn, summing up for the Labour Party national executive, told conference that the party was 100 per cent behind the NUM, and that if the miners were beaten, Labour's chances of winning the next election would be gone.

In the subsequent debate on the police, the conference ignored the executive's recommendation, and passed two resolutions, one moved by a striking Notts miner, the other by supporters of the **Militant** tendency. These called on a future Labour government to disband the riot squads, exclude the police from any industrial disputes, and give local authorities control over their local police forces.

In the final debate of the day, Kinnock saw his attempt to prevent left-wing constituency parties from removing right-wing Labour MPs, by giving the final say in the reselection of sitting MPs to a ballot of all party members, go down to ignominious defeat. No wonder that Ken Livingstone told the **Labour Herald** rally that evening: 'Today has been one of the best days I can remember at a Labour Party conference. The working-class movement is beginning to rebuild its confidence.'

The next day the same delegates who had given Arthur Scargill a standing ovation rose to applaud Neil Kinnock. His parliamentary report was a clever speech. Much of it was an attack on the evils of Thatcherism. But, carefully inserted for the television microphones and the Fleet Street journalists, were the signals of Kinnock's 'statesmanship': 'I condemn violence — yes — of the stone throwers and the battering ram carriers, and of the cavalry charges, the truncheon groups and the shield bangers. I condemn all violence without fear or favour. That's what makes me different from Thatcher — I don't have double standards.'

He went on to argue that trade unions and local councils must respect even Tory laws: 'We cannot sharpen legality as our main weapon for the future and simultaneously scorn legality if it doesn't suit us at the present time.'



For those willing to listen there were plenty of signs that the words in the resolution passed by the TUC Congress and the Labour Party conference would not be put into effect. David Basnett warned during the Labour conference debate on the miners against 'over-politicising' the dispute: 'The ballot box will get rid of Thatcher, negotiations round a table will settle the strike.' He said to Scargill: 'Arthur, you should tell your members: "Do not let them provoke you into violence."' '

The Tories had no such scruples. Scargill was served on the conference floor itself with a summons alleging contempt of court for defying a court ruling that the strike was illegal in Yorkshire. Moss Evans considered moving an emergency resolution defying the law but was dissuaded on the grounds that it would make the Labour Party guilty of contempt of court. The Labour and trade union leaders had no serious intention of fulfilling their activists' hopes.

### **The NACODS disaster**

Both the high risks the Tories were running and the cowardice of the trade union leaders were soon graphically illustrated. The Tories' attempts to engineer a 'surge back to work' in August nearly provoked the total shutdown of the mining industry, which the NUM had been unable to achieve since March.

On 15 August the Coal Board unilaterally ripped up an agreement they had with the pit deputies and overmen's union, NACODS, which guaranteed their pay if they turned back at NUM picket lines. Ned Smith, then Coal Board industrial relations chief, sent out a directive to the Board's area directors: 'When mineworkers are going through pickets then in the board's view there can be no good reason why officials should not go as well.'

NACODS members are legally responsible for safety underground. If they don't work, no-one can go down the pits. Within a month, NACODS members at 14 Yorkshire pits had joined NUM members at the picket lines as the Coal Board stopped the wages of 3,000 men for 'not making sufficient effort to get into work'.

This incredible blunder by the Coal Board came just as leading Tories were talking more and more openly about smashing the miners' union. **The Observer** reported on 23 September: 'The prime minister's associates are talking in terms of a straight victory. "Now is the time to hit Scargill hard," one colleague said.'

Now ministers watched with horror as the NACODS executive



called a strike ballot, strongly and unanimously recommended a strike against both the new guidelines on picket lines and against pit closures, and then won the support of 82.5 per cent of their members. If NACODS came out nationally, even the Nottinghamshire scab pits would be forced to stop working.

Shocked Fleet Street commentators tried to explain why a union that had never been on strike before should suddenly appear so militant. They tried to draw comfort by saying the vote was merely to give their union leaders a better bargaining hand in negotiations and not really a vote for action. That certainly was how NACODS general secretary Peter McNestry and the other union officials used their astonishing ballot result, but it wasn't sufficient explanation of the vote.

All NACODS members were angered at the way the Coal Board ripped up the agreement which, in effect, gave the deputies all the benefits the miners might win through a strike but with none of the pain of losing money. On top of this there was real fear about MacGregor's plans for the industry. These affected NACODS members as directly as NUM members and in April some 54 per cent of NACODS members had voted to join the NUM on strike over pit closures. The vote had been just short of the necessary majority for an actual strike.

In addition, many NACODS members were getting worried about the resentment and settling of scores they would have to face after the strike for having a 'paid holiday' while the men they had to supervise, and their families, suffered increasing hardship and privation. No one in the mining communities of Yorkshire, Durham, Kent and South Wales expected the scabs to face their former workmates once the strike was over. They would either take redundancy or a transfer to Nottinghamshire. But transfers were not open to NACODS members who crossed miners' picket lines and provoked the police rampage through their villages that inevitably followed.

Finally, all NACODS members were once in the NUM and many had been ordinary miners in 1972 and 1974. Many too had brothers, sons or other relatives on the picket line and they knew that a NACODS strike would force the government to negotiate seriously and abandon its plans to grind the NUM into the ground.

But from the start, the hope of NUM members on the picket lines, that the deputies were coming to their aid, was tempered by the knowledge that the deputies had 'always ridden on the backs of the miners' and never fought themselves. The caution was justified, for



no sooner was the ballot result announced than NACODS president Ken Sampey declared that any strike would be postponed for a week. 'Negotiations with the board from now on are from a position of strength,' he said.<sup>14</sup>

Three weeks of stop-start talks followed between NACODS, the NUM, the Coal Board and the arbitration service ACAS. On 9 October the threatened NACODS strike was again delayed to allow for more talks. The events that followed were quite extraordinary.

Coal Board chairman Ian MacGregor picked a fight with NACODS over the new picket line 'guidelines'. Then, in the middle of further negotiations, he went onto the BBC television *Newsnight* programme and announced that NACODS had in fact *agreed* the new guidelines — when they plainly had not. To round off a performance borrowed straight from a 'Carry On' film, he then hinted that the Coal Board could run the industry without the pit deputies anyway!

A row followed between MacGregor and Ned Smith which led to Smith departing on 'indefinite leave' caused by a 'bad back'. The *Sunday Times* commented:

The performance of the Coal Board's 72 year old chairman is causing particular dismay among the several key cabinet ministers; even the prime minister is disappointed with his recent actions. There is a disturbing ring of truth in McNestry's account in the *Daily Mail* of his dealings with MacGregor: 'We tried and tried but he just kept saying "Nope". Then when ACAS decided to end the talks, he said: "Good, now we can all go home".'

Despite all the speculation there are no plans to remove MacGregor. 'We cannot ditch the general in the middle of battle' one cabinet minister told the *Sunday Times*.<sup>15</sup>

After this performance, with very little to show for their efforts, NACODS gave seven days' notice of a strike. Peter McNestry declared: 'We haven't looked for this confrontation. We have done our best to avoid it but it's been forced upon us.'<sup>16</sup>

Four days later the talks were on again. The government, Coal Board and NACODS all desperately wanted a settlement. They quickly thrashed one out. Even the TUC urged NACODS to delay settlement so they could put more pressure on the government to settle with the miners, but with less than 24 hours to go before the first ever deputies' strike, the union leaders called it off.

The NACODS deal marked a shift in tone but not substance by the Coal Board. They agreed to amend the existing Colliery Review



Procedure by creating an independent appeals body to which pit closures and other issues could be referred. The five pits named for closure on 6 March would, the agreement read, 'remain open to be considered in common with all other pits, under the modified colliery review procedure'. The Coal Board also promised to reconsider its proposals to cut capacity 'as a result of the dispute and the changes in need of the market arising also from the circumstances of the dispute.'

The **Financial Times** declared on 25 October: 'The board has effectively given NACODS everything it had asked for.' But the NUM rejected the settlement out of hand, and quite rightly. The offer on the five pits was worse than a promise extracted during earlier negotiations that the pits would be kept open subject only to mining engineers' reports on their safety and exhaustion. But most important of all, there was no guarantee that the Coal Board would alter its plans for the industry one iota. Once the review procedure was exhausted the Coal Board would continue to close pits just as it had done before the strike.

As the NACODS strike was called off, the High Court ordered the sequestration of all the NUM's assets. Again, the miners' union had been left to fight on alone.

### **Why the lights didn't go out**

The decisive betrayal, however, was the TUC's failure to implement the guidelines it had agreed in early September to stop scab coal and oil entering the power stations. In February 1985, Ned Smith, just retired as the NCB's industrial relations director, said it was this that guaranteed the miners' defeat.

In the long run the power stations were bound to be decisive. Power cuts had marked the Tories' defeat in the 1972 and 1974 strikes. The Thatcher government was desperate to avoid them this time. Coal stocks in the power stations were at a record level of 24.3 million tonnes at the start of the strike in March 1984. Nevertheless, **The Economist** calculated on 21 April that the stocks would last for 24 weeks: on this estimate, power cuts would be inevitable in the autumn.

In the end, there were no serious power cuts. This was partly the result of government preparations, and partly because the scabbing in the Nottinghamshire pits meant that coal was kept flowing into the Trent Valley power stations. But even with all these cards up their sleeve, the trumps which the CEGB and government needed to survive were the trade union leaders.





Pickets at Eggborough power station in the summer

First, the trade unions in the power industry settled their 1984 pay claim with indecent haste so there would be no prospect of a power stations dispute while the miners were on strike. On 11 April 1984, officials from the electricians' union, GMBATU, TGWU and the engineers' union met the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) for a first negotiating session. Within hours, they had signed and sealed a 13-month agreement for a 5.2 per cent wage increase.

It was remarkable. No one was consulted, not union executives and certainly not union officials in the power industry. While other trade unions managed to squeeze a little bit extra from their employers in 1984, on the backs of the miners' strike, the unions representing manual workers in the power stations grabbed the first offer on the table. Thus they effectively signalled to the employers that they would co-operate fully in the struggle against the miners.

As miners' pickets appeared at the power station gates and miners' leaders wrote to the power industry unions for support, that is just what the power unions did.

Power workers allowed the CEGB radically to change their working patterns in order to make coal stocks last. Their union leaders either openly encouraged this, or turned a blind eye to it.

In normal times, 80 per cent of electricity is generated by



coal-fired stations, 14 per cent by nuclear power stations, and the rest — a mere 6 per cent — by oil fired stations. During the miners' strike, coal-generated electricity was reduced to 40 per cent of the total, while oil rose to account for 40 per cent and nuclear power to 20 per cent.''

**The Financial Times reported:**

The CEGB — with government support — decided on 28 March to maximise its oil burn at any cost and within weeks it was all systems go at the Isle of Grain and Littlebrook power stations, long ago regarded as white elephants. Also hard at work were Fawley and Pembroke in the South West, for years regarded as too costly to run for more than six hours a day. North of the border, the South of Scotland Electricity Board switched on its own oil burning white elephant at Inverkip to export power to England.<sup>18</sup>

As the oil-fired stations came on stream, coal stations were taken off. First Didcot near Oxford and Aberthaw in South Wales were shut down, then nearly 90 per cent of the main coal fired generating capacity in the North of England was taken out of action to conserve coal stocks until winter.<sup>19</sup>

The unions allowed an extraordinary situation to develop where their members in coal-fired power stations in the solid areas of the strike were blacking coal, while other union members were in effect scabbing by doing massive overtime to get the CEGB through to winter. Some unions, notably ASLEF, the NUR and the seafarers' union, did organise blacking of coal. The Transport and General Workers Union, on the other hand, did very little.

At the beginning of the strike Moss Evans declared that not one ton of coal would be allowed to be moved from the open-cast mines, where TGWU members were producing the coal. However, from early November, 150,000 tons of coal were moved every week from the open-cast mines without the TGWU leadership ever condemning this or calling on their members to stop work.

On 7 June Arthur Scargill and Mick McGahey addressed a meeting of TGWU national, regional and executive officials. Afterwards TGWU general secretary Moss Evans asked his members not to cross picket lines and to black the movement of coal and oil for power stations. **The Guardian** reported: 'Mr Moss Evans . . . said the union could not order its members to comply but the order was "something tantamount to an instruction".'<sup>20</sup>



Throughout the strike, the solidarity action by railway workers and seafarers was undermined by lorry drivers while, despite the TGWU's 'something tantamount to an instruction', the union did little to stop the convoys. Of course it wouldn't have been an easy task, but it was never seriously undertaken.

The Scottish firm of Yull and Dodds were threatened with blacking for running convoys into Ravenscraig, but the threat swiftly evaporated. Similarly the TGWU threatened to remove the union cards of drivers running scab coal into Llanwern — not for scabbing, but because they were behind with their union dues, a problem that was quickly 'sorted out'.

But the real betrayal of the miners came after the TUC Congress in September.

Three weeks after the TUC vote, the GMBATU, the union with the largest membership in the power stations, produced proposals which the **Financial Times** said 'could, if implemented by its members, result in power cuts by mid-November'. The proposals were for the power station workers to refuse scab coal, whether it be imported, from open cast or from working pits. It also called on power station workers not to accept more than the usual amount of oil. The **FT** explained that GMBATU 'believes it can win acceptance among its own and TGWU members who also handle fuel — since they rely on the concept of "working normally" rather than taking specific disruptive action.'<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, the unions which agreed to take action, GMBATU, TGWU, AUEW and the building workers' union UCATT, were sure that the electricians' union and the Engineers and Managers Association, who had spurned the miners' calls, would not do work that had been blacked.

After a series of power station meetings in early October, union officials confidently predicted power cuts within the month, but there was one crucial weakness. Neither the transport workers' nor the GMBATU leaders actually instructed their members to operate the blacking. Instead they 'advised' their members to abide by the TUC guidelines. Union officials claimed: 'It is better to win support than to order it' — a statement that would be more credible if there had been a serious campaign round the power stations.

The real reason for the lack of an instruction was fear of the courts, as a steward from the coal-fired Longannet power station in Scotland explained: 'They say they won't issue instructions because they might not get support. That might be partly true. But if anything,



what they fear is actually getting the support and then being bankrupted by the courts.’<sup>22</sup>

No meetings were organised by the TGWU and GMBATU between shop stewards in the power stations and miners’ representatives. The first meeting between Arthur Scargill and shop stewards in the power stations in the Yorkshire Area did not take place until the strike had been going for ten and a half months — on 16 January 1985.

This half-hearted attempt to stop the power stations proved disastrous both for those militants inside the power stations who *were* fighting to get the TUC guidelines implemented, and for the miners whose leaders believed that TGWU and GMBATU officials were winning the battle inside the power stations.

Coal stocks at the power stations fell from 24 million tons to 14.5 million tons between March and November 1984, despite the use of oil-fired power stations and without the ‘TUC guidelines’. In November, using detailed CEGB figures, **Socialist Worker** estimated that stocks would be down to nine million tons by Christmas 1984, 6.5 million tons at the end of January 1984 and 3.5 million tons at the end of February 1984, by which time there would either be power cuts, or the government would have to try a massive operation to bring pithead stocks to the power stations, with the likelihood of confrontation and mass picketing such as that seen at Orgreave.

But we were wrong. The **Financial Times** reported:

On Christmas eve, Mr Peter Walker . . . received a surprise present from Sir Walter Marshall, Chairman of the Central Electricity Generating Board. It was a confidential disclosure that although the worst of the winter might lie ahead, so much coal was reaching power stations that he could start planning to reduce the amount of coal being used during the miners’ strike.<sup>23</sup>

Coal deliveries to power stations had risen from 500,000 tons a week in the summer to 750,000 a week by November and December.

There was another, less well-documented innovation by the CEGB to break the miners’ strike. During the summer, when the big coal stations were taken off stream, some of the coal-burners were converted to use oil — something which had first been proposed in the Ridley Report back in 1978. Very few power union members blacked the enormous amounts of extra oil that were being burnt. In some stations, union officials even encouraged their members to accept the extra oil, saying they were normal deliveries!

The final card in the management’s hands was the massive





Police hold back South Wales pickets as fuel oil tankers go into Didcot power station in October 1984

publicity throughout the autumn of the miners' 'drift back to work'. The CEBG used this to apply the pressure to power station workers who lived outside the solidly striking coalfields to get them to lift their blacking on coal. This eventually happened at Didcot and in Lancashire at the small Bold power station.

At the same time the CEBG was careful not to provoke power workers in the core areas of the miners' strike. They never ran scab coal into the Yorkshire power stations, for example. And the coal stocks moved from Yorkshire pits towards the end of the strike were not needed in the power stations. Those operations were simply to demoralise the miners and make them feel their battle was lost.

The scale and complexity of the scabbing operation were vast. A **Channel 4 News** report on 7 March 1985, after the strike was over, revealed that the power stations were burning 600,000 tonnes of oil a week during the winter. This involved the CEBG buying heavily on the world oil markets — their requirements were equivalent to *one third* of OPEC's total fuel oil production. At \$190 a tonne the weekly oil bill amounted to about £106.5 million. However, the report concluded, 'if the TUC guidelines had carried more weight', the government's enormous and costly operation would have been 'irrelevant'.



There *was* support to be tapped. Workers at Didcot power station made a brave attempt to black coal. Oil tanker drivers blacked oil going into some power stations, and suffered as a result. Shell drivers lost a contract to take heavy fuel oil into Eggborough power station because they respected miners' picket lines. Esso and Petrofina both lost contracts to supply the Yorkshire power stations. Even in Nottingham TGWU drivers respected picket lines. In East London Texaco drivers walked out after their work was given to scabs.

These instances of solidarity action by rank-and-file workers are signs of what could be achieved if the trade union leaders had been prepared to campaign systematically in support of the miners. Their failure to do so doomed the strike to defeat. The leaders of the most powerful left-wing union, the giant TGWU, carry a particularly heavy responsibility.